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ABSTRACT

The success of Philadelphia's "What Works in Reading?" report shows how educational research can be a catalyst for school change and indicates a way for school districts to institutionalize this process. Ten factors were associated with the report's immediate impact on educational policy: identification of the research clients, topical importance, participant involvement, high technical quality, effective reporting formats, close relationship to the decision process, preparatory briefing of policy makers, anticipation of resistance, use of an ombudsman, and entrepreneurial advocacy of the report. A school district can deal with these ten factors on an ongoing basis by establishing a strategic planning and development unit. As proposed for the Philadelphia School District, such a unit would enhance the decision-making process, improve general and specific planning, help maximize district productivity, and facilitate achievement of the district's mission. Among ten suggested activities for such a unit are studying cost effectiveness, planning for school closing, and improving purchasing procedures. The unit's staff should include planners, analysts, and support personnel. (RW)

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INSTITUTIONALIZING EDUCATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

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I. Introduction

The basic thesis of this paper is quite simple. It states that a pivotal step in increasing productivity in education is to translate that which (according to the research) works into practice. For the past decade-and-a-half, education has suffered from the "layered look." That is to say, each new and promising innovation has been layered upon that which came before it. Rarely has an innovation which hasn't proved effective been eliminated. Instead, new approaches have been added. The dysfunctional and the non-productive have not been eliminated.

The increasing number of production function studies, studies of successful practices, and effective school studies bear witness to the fact that interest in this topic has never waned. Simply dealing with ways in which to translate that which works into practice is insufficient, however. What is also needed is a vehicle to take the information generated by research and evaluation studies and to institutionalize it. This paper will attempt to first present ten factors which are viewed as crucial to the translation of educational research and evaluation into policy and, secondly, to suggest a vehicle for the institutionalization of these factors.

II. Factors Associated With the Translation of Research and Evaluation Findings Into Policy.

Many individuals have undertaken work in the area of utilization factors. Particularly notable are the recommendations for the communication of research data developed by Brickell and Aslanian and those factors affecting utilization developed by Marv Alkin and his group at UCLA. Though these studies and other works have been reviewed, the factors discussed here are tied to a very different source.

The factors recommended here have been drawn from a school system's actual experiences with and response to a study entitled, "What Works in Reading?" This piece of work was conducted over a three-and-one-half year period, but sprang from earlier research dating back to 1971.

An agreement was reached whereby the Office of Research and Evaluation of the School District of Philadelphia and the Research Department of the Federal Reserve Bank would meet to discuss the development of a study utilizing, as a base, the methodology employed by the Federal Reserve Bank in their previous educational productivity research, but integrating within it, the concerns and learning priorities of the School District.

The results of "What Works in Reading?", a joint School District/Federal Reserve Bank empirical study in Philadelphia were released in June of 1979. Though controversial, the study has sparked an enormous amount of national interest and attention.

The purpose of this study was to determine what makes a difference in teaching children to read. The years of experience of many thousands of teachers have testified to the fact that no one, simple, magical solution could be expected. It was, therefore, the task of this study to try to identify the factors that contributed most strongly to achievement growth in reading. In particular, there was interest in appraising the relative merits of various approaches to reading.

The methodology and the results of the "What Works in Reading?" study have been described elsewhere and will not be dealt with here. What is more germane to this paper is <u>why</u> the results had the impact that they did. For example, the dissemination of the results of this study, particularly the involvement of the mass media, certainly played a crucial role.

The very day the study was presented at a public Board of Education meeting in June of 1979, it began making news. Though purely of local interest at first, a wire service story resulted in it being featured in The Los Angeles Times the following week. By mid-summer over a thousand inquiries had been received.

Local television and radio stations broadcast stories on the results of the study, with both of the city's all-news radio stations producing feature reports and four stations taping brief interviews with the major authors. The three major daily metropolitan newspapers published extensive stories, each focusing on a somewhat different aspect of the study, but all covering the major findings.

Following the initial local media coverage and the wire story filed by the Associated Press, a number of major educational periodicals reported the study's results. Education USA, the most widely circulated weekly education newsletter, devoted three of its eight pages to it. The lead article, "New Study Finds What Worked in Reading," focused upon the more potentially controversial findings, and emphasized both what made no difference, as well as what worked. In addition, a second article of the "analysis" variety was also included.

The Education USA articles created an enormous demand for the report. By the end of the summer, over three thousand inquiries had been received. The "Newsfront" section of the first Phi Delta Kappan of the new school year (September 1979) featured the study via an article entitled "What's the Best Way to Teach Reading? Here's a Surprise." As a result, several thousand additional requests were received within the next eight weeks.

Let us return to local impact for a moment. Perhaps the major impact of the study took the form of what came to be erroneously viewed by many as a companion document to the report, entitled "A Blueprint for Academic Achievement." Two months prior to its release, the superintendent anticipated the "Blueprint" in comments reported by Education USA when he "...praised the researchers for their 'significant findings' which, he said, would result in 'specific recommendations' ..."

The "Blueprint", as the document came to be known, took the form of a 22-page draft document transmitted by the superintendent of schools to his executive cabinet for review, discussion, and refinement. It was developed largely as a result of a charge to the School District's Office of Curriculum and Instruction to study "the problems of raising achievement, particularly in schools with greatest need." Unbeknownst to the authors of "What Works in Reading?", the report of the Curriculum Office was integrated with the research study, by other members of the Superintendent's staff. The result was an unsuspected though pleasant surprise to the researchers, for the "Blueprint" had, indeed, drawn heavily upon their work. In his introductory memorandum, the superintendent stated:

> .....I have read in-depth the research report, "What Works in Reading?". I believe it can prove to be one of the most significant reports on reading achievement in the recent history of public education, and I have included several of its recommendations in this document.

In actuality, ten of the "Blueprint's" 36 specific recommended actions flowed directly from "What Works in Reading?", with an equal number at least tangentially related to the study.

"What Works in Reading?" was not just another piece of research. Unlike many studies which are politely accepted and then shelved to gather dust, this study had a real impact. The extent of that impact, and the ultimate level of utilization remains to be seen. The fact is, however, that "What Works in Reading?" succeeded as a catalyst for change where other such efforts have failed. The question is, why?

There are a number of possible answers to that question, with no single explanation accounting for the difference. The author's participation in the study and in the process of its explanation and implementation would lead him to suggest four possible areas critical to the study's impact: (1) maximizing outside involvement while establishing internal ownership, (2) a proactive approach to planning for change, (3) attempting to minimize resistance to change, and (4) attempting to build upon factors associated with research utilization.

As a result of an analysis of this study and its impact, ten general factors associated with its translation into educational policy seem to have emerged. These ten factors certainly do not comprise a finite listing; they would seem to relate to the study examined here, but may not necessarily apply to all similar situations. Perhaps even more important, however, is the caveat that this listing may well represent but a fraction of the total range of such factors. The ten general areas are as follows:

1. Identification of Clients. It is important to single out the specific clients and client groups who are most closely related to the research being undertaken, as well as most directly affected by any policy decisions likely to be developed as a result of that research. The expectations of the clients, as well

as the type of information and services which they require, are important considerations in focusing the research and evaluation process.

2. Vitality of the Topic. There are a great many topics whose thrust is so tangential to the solution of a particular problem that they will seldom generate very much interest. The solution of a topic directly related to a highly visible problem may virtually assure that the results of the study of that topic will be carefully considered. In framing a topic for study, criteria such as importance, visibility, acceptability and understandability should all be reviewed.

3. Participant Involvement. It is important to involve as many of those groups who will likely be ultimately affected by the study as is possible. The involvement should be genuine, not merely "window dressing." Though this may lengthen the period of the study, it will pay handsome dividends in the long run.

4. Technical Quality. The technical aspects of the study, in terms of research methodology, appropriate measurement techniques, and careful reporting, must be beyond reproach. Wherever possible, the study should improve upon previous major works in the area. In addition, the use of multiple measures will greatly enhance the study's acceptability.

5. Reporting Formats. A variety of reporting formats is very necessary if a study's results are to be adequately communicated. Since

most decisions are made by laymen, the basic report should be as non-technical as possible and should always include an executive summary and/or abstract. In addition, an illustrated, popularized version tends to be very useful in communicating with the public at large, as is the use of multi-media materials such as slides, large graphics, etc. A full technical report should be available for that small minority of individuals interested in the technical specifics of the study.

6. Findings "Keyed" to the Decision Process. Timing is all important if research and evaluation results are to have genuine impact upon policy. In order to perfect such timing, it may be useful to attempt to detemine the type of decisions likely to be made as a result of a research study. Wherever possible, a study's results as well as recommendations for policy should relate to the general context of the school system and should be demonstratively cost effective and/or cost efficient.

7. Preparation of Policy Makers. The provision of advance briefings for key decision and policymakers is of tremendous value. Such briefings should include a non-technical overview of the specific results of the piece of research, the relationship of those results to the needs of the system, and the specific implications for policy which seem to spring from the study. Those research studies which have actually been "commissioned" by decision makers would seem to stand the greatest chance of ultimately having an impact.

8. Overcoming Resistance. The ability of a study team to pay particular attention to the potential problems created by their work will go a long way in reducing resistance. The degree to which such points of resistance can be dealt with prior to their surfacing will, in the long run, minimize disruption of both the conduct of the research and the translation of its results into practice.

9. The Role of the Ombudsman. A member of a study team vested with the responsibility to function as an ombudsman or trouble-shooter during the study's implementation will help reduce both resistance and misunderstanding. Such an individual should initiate dialog, not wait for problems to occur. The ombudsman should attempt to work with clients prior to, during, and after implementation of the study.

10. The Role of the Entrepreneur. A final factor to be considered as an important correlate of policy decisions is the entrepreneurial role. This role may be played by either the individual(s) responsible for producing the research and/or evaluative information or the decision maker ultimately responsible for translating it into policy and acting upon it. If the policy maker exhibits entrepreneurial behavior, the researcher's role is considerably simplified. Since this is not typically the case, however, it is the potential impact of the researcher's entrepreneurial acumen which would seem to be more critical.

The entrepreneurial role would seem to be not only appropriate, but extremely useful in working toward the acceptance of research information, and ultimately translating it into policy. In playing the role of the entrepreneur, the researcher cannot assume a neutral posture. He must, in fact, be a strong advocate of the utilization of that information which he has developed and should, from the outset, approach his task with an eye toward its translation into policy. It is important to remember that advocacy of the utilization of data need not compromise objectivity in the conduct of research or evaluation.

Though each of these factors may be directly linked to the translation of research into practice, neither piecemeal implementation nor random attention to the entire group will prove effective. What is really needed is a means by which a school district can deal with each of these factors on a continual, ongoing basis. I would suggest that the way to do this is by the creation of a vehicle for institutionalizing these factors, and such institutionalization might best be undertaken by the development of a strategic planning and development unit.

That which follows represents such a unit developed for a large city school system. This particular proposal was developed for the School District of Philadelphia, but might well fit most others with but minor modifications.

III. A Strategic Planning and Development Unit.

A. Rationale

Planning is an integral part of any decision making system. Planning and development activities provide a framework for integrated decision making within an organization, and they provide the means by which organizations cope with a complex, dynamic, ever-changing environment.

Unless planning and development are formally subscribed to and recognized by the assignment of staff for this purpose, the exigencies of daily operations will pre-empt analysis and planning for the future. A formalized and structured planning and development process will enhance the decision making process at all levels by:

1) identifying and examining long range conditions which are expected to influence school districts, (e.g. demographic factors);
2) developing and communicating goals, objectives, strategies, action programs, and contingency plans for use by school districts;
3) maintaining adherence to a school district's mission; and
4) establishing accountability by providing standards and feedback systems for monitoring outcomes within the district.

Effective strategic planning and development will provide the means for reducing uncertainty; focus attention on objectives, plans, and means of evaluation; help to gain and maintain economy and efficiency of operations; and facilitate both control and communication within the system.

A strategic planning and development unit can yield cost savings that are far beyond the unit's cost and can assist in the development of policies that will improve the productivity, operation and effectiveness of school districts.

All large corporate entities, as well as many governmental units, make use of strategic planning. It is standard procedure for the more innovative and effective companies to devote between 5 and 12 percent of their budgets to planning and development activities. With budgets totaling hundreds of millions of dollars, large urban school districts are certainly major organizations. Given diminished resources, it is more important than ever to target their funds from less effective activities to those proven, more productive approaches.

Thus, during these times of decreasing resources and increasing costs, the implementation of a strategic planning and development unit within school districts should be considered more critical than ever.

B. The Use of Strategic Planning and Development

All school districts plan. Determining teacher allotments, developing the annual budget, initiating performance appraisal processes, and anticipating the effects of declining enrollments and subsequent school closings, are but a few of the many areas which require planning by school districts.

For the most part, however, this type of planning is developed within the administrative units responsible for implementation. Key administrative staff then act on planning type recommendations and present them for consideration to the Board of Education. The Board may act on recommendations, and from them, develop a policy.

This procedure works unevenly, however. Although all school districts plan, few have separate divisions for strategic planning and development within their line organizations. For established planning efforts, such as teacher allotments or budgets, the need for such a unit may not be readily apparent.

With increasing frequency, school districts are faced with crisis situations which simultaneously impact upon many of their operations divisions. A situation may develop which is likely to have long range implications for an entire school district. In cases such as these, an established strategic planning and development unit would be much better prepared to act.

An example of the potential value of such a division can be seen by examining the Department of Educational Accountability of the Montgomery County, Maryland Public Schools. In the past several years, acting at the request of their Board of Education, this Department has conducted studies such as:

- The cost effectiveness of premium versus regular gasoline in the District's public school buses
- The delivery of maintenance services to schools
- An evaluation of textbook costs, usage, and needs
- Streamlining the relationship between the Personnel, Insurance and Retirement Divisions.

These studies, as well as others, have resulted in higher levels of productivity and cost effectiveness, which translated into real dollar savings to the Montgomery County, Maryland Public Schools.

School districts with separate strategic planning and development divisions have the capability to conduct such studies in order to prepare logical decision alternatives for board members whose responsibility it is to set policy.

C. Mission

The mission of a strategic planning and development unit might be to assist in maximizing the effectiveness and productivity of the school district in providing educational services in accordance with the objectives of the school district and the needs of its constituents. Such a unit would develop alternative courses of action which, when implemented, would enable the school district to operate most effectively and efficiently. In describing these alternative options, the costs, benefits, and pitfalls of each would also be thoroughly documented. Thus, the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools would have more complete information for policy setting and implementation.

D. Objectives

The specific objectives of a strategic planning and development unit might include the following:

- To maximize the effectiveness of a school district in accordance with its priorities.
- To provide a school district with an increased planning capability.
- To improve a school district's decision making capability by providing decision alternatives.
- To assess the implications of policy issues of a school district.
- To assist a school district by making recommendations for improving its various subsystems.
- To support school district personnel by providing the technical assistance necessary for them to plan and initiate change.

A suggested list of planned activities to be initially undertaken by a strategic planning and development unit as well as one possible staffing configuration are both included in the appendices to this paper.

IV. Conclusions.

In summary, I have attempted to link educational productivity to the utilization of existing research findings by way of focusing upon ten factors which have been deemed crucial to the translation of research and evaluation into policy. I have further suggested that one means of institutionalizing these factors is to establish a strategic planning and development unit within the school district organization with the responsibility for, among other things,

the continuous attention to the relationship between planning, information and productivity-related decisions.

During these times of double digit inflation, a diminished tax picture and eroding governmental support for education, a businesslike approach to productivity, cost effectiveness and accountability is more critical than ever before. Given the costs of running a school district and pressures on the available resources, never has the time been better for practically-oriented strategic planning and development.

Appendix A

Planned Activities for a

Strategic Planning and Development Unit

For a strategic planning and development unit to be effective, it must be able to demonstrate cost savings. Immediacy, cost-effectiveness, and ease of implementation must be considered in the selection of areas to be examined. Listed below are some of the areas that were suggested for initial consideration by the strategic planning and development unit being planned in Philadelphia.

These topics were presented for consideration because of their potential for long term or short term real dollar savings to the School District or because they might result in improved efficiencies in its operation.

1. Develop strike contingency plans which take into consideration local, State and Federal support, assistance and penalties.

2. Study cost savings to be realized through reduction of vandalism by means of different techniques. (E.g., incentive plans vs. plexiglas in reducing window breakage.)

3. Review prior studies on the school district to determine which findings and recommendations would yield maximum benefits given the costs.

4. Study the possibility of providing selected services to neighboring districts (e.g., data processing, special education...)

5. Study cost effects of attendance, both staff and pupil incentives, and develop alternatives.

6. Develop a systematic and comprehensive plan for school closings and reorganizations on a multi-year cycle.

7. Study resource allocations and per pupil expenditure patterns in the schools.

8. Examine the effects of present personnel policies on the budget (e.g., sabbatical leave, sick leave, master's equivalency premium).

9. Review PL94-142 activities (including compliance status and efficiency of the process) in order to increase system efficiency and cost effectiveness.

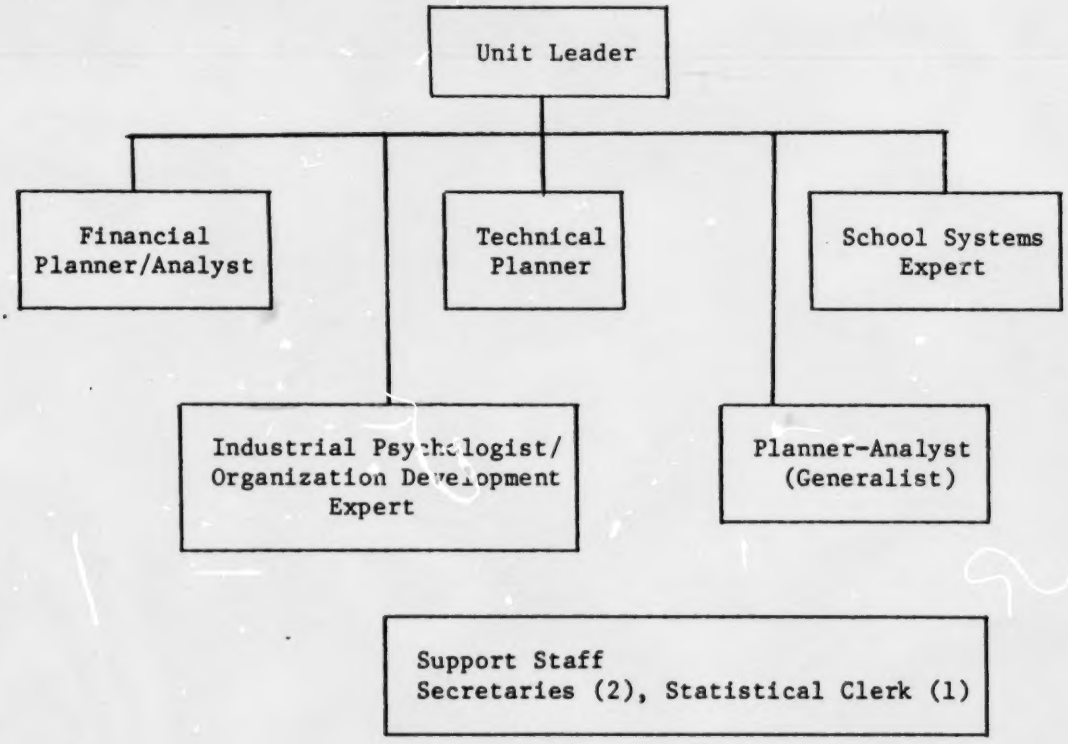
10. Improve present purchasing and work order procedures (including processing, follow-up, delivery).

The establishment of policy is the function and responsibility of the Board of Education. The strategic planning and development unit would serve a school district by systematized and regularized data gathering and analysis and by conducting those studies required to develop recommendations for setting policy and insuring its effective implementation.

Appendix B

A Staffing Configuration for a

Strategic Planning and Development Unit



One possible configuration for a Strategic Planning and Development Unit is pictured above. It is anticipated that the unit leader would manage the planning process. This person would serve as the prime contact with the rest of the school system. The unit leader will be responsible for resource allocation and the assignment of tasks within the unit.

School Systems Expert. This person will function to keep the unit's tasks practical and applicable. The person filling this position must have knowledge of the entire school system -- operationally and politically; as well as skill in the planning process.

Financial Planner/Analyst. This person must be one who is familiar with the budgeting process. He/she must know what questions to ask and where cost savings may be affected. Some knowledge of the law would be an asset.

Technical Planner. This person should have a Master of City Planning or a Master of Public Administration degree and should come to the job with practical experience. This is the staff member who is technically oriented and who will be responsible for synthesizing the unit's work.

Planner/Analyst (Generalist). This person must have knowledge of the school district, systems designs, network planning, and the costs of resources.

Industrial Psychologist/Organizational Development (Trainer). This is a human resources specialist who will be able to make recommendations on how organizations might function more effectively. This person will be used as a trainer and will deal with personnel matters.

Support Staff. Two secretaries and one statistical clerk will provide most of the support required by the unit. In order to deal with peak periods of data reduction/analysis, per diem assistance would also be needed. Special cooperative assistance programs with other school systems, universities, governmental agencies, and business and industry will also be developed.